

"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

The Christian Rural Fellowship Bulletin

Published by The Christian Rural Fellowship, Room 1111, 156 Fifth Avenue, New York, N. Y.

Number 10

March 1936

RURAL AND URBAN PHILOSOPHIES*

By O. E. Baker

Deeper in my opinion than the differences between individualistic or laissez-faire economics and socialism, deeper even than the differences between capitalism and communism, are those between rural and urban attitudes toward life. The farmer tends to think in terms of plants and animals, of birth and growth and death. The city man, on the other hand, tends to think in terms of wheels and levers and machines, or of buying and selling. Whereas agriculture is founded on life processes, particularly as influenced by soil and weather and the laws of inheritance, urban occupations are founded on manufacturing and commerce, and the activities are mostly carried on indoors. To the city child milk is associated with a bottle, not with a cow; an apple comes from a box, not from a tree; and these early impressions influence, I believe, the ideas of later life.

As a consequence the farmer's philosophy of life is primarily organic, whereas the city man's philosophy usually is mechanistic. The farmer lives in a natural world, the city man in an artificial world. Because of his occupation the farmer's thoughts are largely biological, whereas the city man's thoughts are largely physical or economic. In farming the family is the economic and social unit—it is difficult, almost impossible, to farm without a wife, and children can help with the work from about ten years of age onward. In the city, on the other hand, the individual is the economic unit—a wife adds little, if anything, to the family income unless she works outside the home, in which case it is difficult to rear a family, and children involve expense, with little if any return, from birth till marriage. It costs generally two to three times as much to rear a child in the city as it does on the farm.

Perhaps because of the open air, and the contact with nature, perhaps because the farmer sees the stars at night and observes the progress of the seasons, perhaps also because of stronger family ties, farmers and farm women tend to think of the past and the future; city people, it seems to me, tend to think more about the present. Thrift has been called into question by many city people today; the workday, it is urged, should be shortened to six hours so that everyone will be employed, and children by some are considered a luxury to be indulged in only by people of ample means. Granting that thrift may be carried too far, that all should work who are able, and that parents should feel a keen sense of responsibility in bringing children into the world, the fact remains that the philosophy of life which is popular in the cities today leads to the disintegration of the family and to national and social decay.

*From a paper by Dr. O. E. Baker entitled Farming as a Life Work delivered at Rural Youth Conference, University of Illinois, April 27, 1935.

Last summer I attended a conference of agricultural economists in Germany, and for a week before and a week after the conference our German hosts arranged for a few of us to visit German farms. At each farm we visited we were provided with a page or two of mimeographed information about the farm. Most of the mimeographed sheet told of the acreage of the crops, yield per acre, fertilizer used, crop rotations, number of horses, cattle, milk cows, swine, chickens, etc., but always at the top of the page for those farms which could claim the honor, and most of them could, was a statement somewhat as follows: "This farm has been in the family 300 years." Some farms had been in the family for 400 years, some 500 years; one farm had been in the family since the eleventh century. As I considered what had happened during these centuries, the thought came to me, how many times would this family have lost its wealth had it been invested in anything else than land.

The farm in Germany is typically considered a heritage from the past, an "Erbhof" or hereditary home, to be passed on from father to son for as long as the family line remains intact. In southern Germany the farms are frequently divided between the children, as in the United States, one son usually buying out the others and getting into debt to do so; but in northern Germany it is customary, to avoid debt or too small farms, to pass on the farm to one child, frequently the youngest son, the older son having gone to the city to make his fortune. All the children have the right to return to the farm in times of distress for shelter and sustenance.

This concept of the farm as the hereditary home of the family has profound consequences. I saw practically no soil erosion in Germany, except in the vineyards on the steep slopes of the Rhine Valley. This is owing partly to the cool summer climate, with few torrential rains, partly to the crops grown, but partly also, and perhaps primarily, to the conviction that the land is the foundation of the family—the heritage from the past to be handed on to the next generation undiminished in fertility, and, if possible, with its productivity increased. I could sense among the German farmers, or Bauern, as they are called, the feeling that a man who let his land erode was not only dishonoring his ancestors but also was depriving his son of his proper heritage. The German farmer is keeping faith with the past and with the future. He is conserving both natural and human resources. He has a philosophy of life which I wish were more common in the United States today.

German agriculture is less commercial than the agriculture of our Corn Belt. And what money the German farmer makes in good times is mostly plowed back into the farm, so to speak; a new house or barn is built, or a piece of land is drained, or better stock is bought. The German farmer does not retire to the county seat when old age draws nigh, as many farmers in the Corn Belt did before the depression, and build a house that represents the savings of a lifetime. Instead the German "vater" and "mutter" retire to a portion of the farm home, which is usually much larger and better built than farm homes in our Corn Belt, and a tenant or partnership contract is entered into with the son, who, with his family, occupies the remainder of the house. Sometimes a new house is built for the old folks or for the son. This son who later inherits the farm does not spend most of his life, and that of his wife also, digging and delving and saving to pay off the mortgage on the farm; but he starts without debt, in a house that is usually built of brick, with a tile roof, and his savings are in turn used to improve the farm and educate the children. Each generation, so to speak, climbs from the shoulders of the preceding generation, and wealth and culture accumulate, instead of being dissipated by migration to the cities. When farmers in a district customarily retire to town and half the children go to the cities, as occurred in the United

States during the decade prior to the depression, and these children must be paid their share of the estate by the son or tenant who takes over the farm, it is clear that much if not most of the value of farm property moves from the rural district in each generation. The young man who starts operating a Corn Belt farm today, unless he inherits the farm, has a harder task before him in acquiring wealth than did the pioneer of years ago on the frontier, for he starts with a load of debt:

If the youth on the farms could start life free from this debt, which is particularly heavy in agriculture because of the high ratio of investment to income, the farmers of the Corn Belt within two or three generations might reach a level of culture and comfort such as the world has never known. For no other region in the world of equal magnitude has so fertile soils, so large a proportion of level or gently rolling land adapted to the use of machinery, a climate so favorable to the two most productive feed crops, corn and alfalfa, and a market of 50,000,000 urban people lying adjacent on the east, north, and south with no tariff barriers between. Nature has been particularly gracious to the Corn Belt, but man has been taking nature's bounty and building out of it skyscrapers in the cities. Already many of these skyscrapers are a quarter or even half vacant, and unless the birthrate of the Nation soon rises, they will be less needed a quarter century hence than they are now. Nature has provided in the Corn Belt the basis for as fine a rural aristocracy as the world has ever known, but instead it is becoming a land of tenant farmers living in houses that are frequently little better than hovels.

The cities apparently are leading the Nation down much the same path of depopulation and decline that the Roman Empire followed nearly two milleniums ago. In 1920 there were about enough children in the cities of over 100,000 population to keep the population of those cities stationary. But the cities grew rapidly, because of immigration from Europe and migration from the farms, also because of relatively few deaths, attributable to the large proportion of young and middle-aged people. By 1930, however, the census showed from 20 to 25 per cent deficit in these large cities in number of children necessary to keep the population stationary. Now it is about 33 per cent. In the small cities there was a 10 per cent deficit in 1930. On the other hand, in the village population there was a 30 per cent surplus in children and in the farm population a 50 per cent surplus above the number required to maintain a stationary population. Rural surplus and urban deficit about balanced in 1930. With immigration from Europe now greatly reduced, in fact practically cut off, and with the many middle-aged people becoming old, it is clear that the cities are dependent on the farm and village population, not only for a permanent increase of population but to prevent a decline a decade hence. If the birthrate continues to fall and no increase in immigration is permitted, the natural increase of the rural population will not be sufficient to prevent a decline, not only in the urban population, but also in the total population of the Nation. The number of children born in the Nation has declined more than 20 per cent during the last 10 years, and enrollment in the lower grades of the public schools is now decreasing rapidly. On the other hand, a rapid increase is occurring in the farm population, particularly in much of the South and in other sections where the land is poor, the birthrate is high, and the rural population is dense.

Young people who move from the farms to the cities should realize the grave danger that their families will die out, in addition to the uncertainty of employment; though if they remain on farms they face the probability of a decreasing number of consumers after a decade or two, and the possibility of an increasing number of producers of farm products.

For the farmer who realizes the significance of his work, I believe there is no occupation that affords more substantial enjoyment. Ruskin, the great English author and art critic, wrote many years ago that "There is no wealth but life."¹ The farmer deals with life--plant life, animal life, and human life. Crops are planted and harvested year after year. Individual plants die and disappear, but the production of wheat and corn and cotton goes on without end. The farmer raises horses and cattle and chickens, and appreciates the importance of good stock and of the laws of inheritance. The bones of the little primitive horse have been found in abundance in rocks that are millions of years old, and the horse will doubtless continue millions of years into the future. Let us hope that the history of the human race will show similar continuity and progress.

Agriculture is based on this fact of reproduction, and the continuity of life. The farmer is constantly dealing with this eternal life. It is a life subject to modification, however, as witness the dairy cow, whose production of milk has been increased twofold, possibly threefold, within a century. The farmer is the heir of all the ages, with an opportunity, through animal breeding particularly, to benefit all the ages to come. The oldest thing in the world is life--older than the mountains, older even than the rivers. And the youngest thing in the world is life.

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1. The declining population which is developing in many cities, and will soon become marked unless migration from the farms to the cities is speedily resumed, will illustrate this fact vividly in years to come.